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ABSTRACT

Developed for handicapped artists, Degraded Imagery is a technique whereby images can be extracted and refined from a photograph or a collage of photographs. The advantage of this process is that it requires a lower degree of fine motor skills to produce a quality image from a photograph than it does to create a quality image on a blank piece of paper. The primary steps are: elimination of excess detail, control of resolution, addition of texture, and addition of color. A partial list of materials that can be used are salt, glue, makeup, water color, chalk, shellac, bath crystals, furniture polish, talcum powder, steel wool, and thermofax transparencies. (SB)

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Degraded Imagery/Art Technique for the Handicapped

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Degraded Imagery

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"Degraded Imagery" is the name given to a system of techniques developed over four years to aid handicapped artists. The process began to formulate in 1977 when I worked at a camp for handicapped people. I discovered in their arts and crafts thoughts and emotions but they were often obscured by poor technique. There was a need for a fine art accepted by the art establishment and accessible to the handicapped artist. There was a need for a process which would eliminate the effects of their dissability while not stifling their creativity nor limiting their freedom of expression. "Degraded Imagery" is that process whereby a handicapped artist can produce fine images in unlimited styles of a quality comparable to nonhandicapped artists. "Degraded Imagery" has started to gain acceptance in the art community, it has been exhibited at Tower Hill Academy in Delaware, The Commissary in Philadelphia, and was utilized on the cover of the Philadelphia College of Pharmacy and Science Annual Report. The fundamentals of this process are adaptable to aid artists with a multitude of diverse dissabilities.

The concept for the process developed when I noticed a ruined photograph that reminded me of a work of art I had seen in a museum. I took the photograph to the museum and was shocked by the resemblance. A thought came to me that all images could be obtained in either of two opposite directions. It is not necessary that all images be built up on a blank piece of paper, the same images can be extracted from photographs. "Degraded Imagery" is that process of extracting and refining an image of your own from a photograph or a collage of photographs.

The advantage of "Degraded Imagery" to the handicapped artist is that it requires a lower degree of fine motor skills to produce a quality image from a photograph than it does to create a quality image on a blank piece of paper. A major obstacle a disabled artist faces is the level of fine motor skills necessary to create subject detail in their art work. Subject detail is that detail which tends to identify a subject as a specific subject. "Degraded Imagery" eliminates the burden of creating subject detail by hand.

Because of the diversity of images "Degraded Imagery" must be able to produce, "Degraded Imagery" includes a vast variety of techniques, and a wide array of materials. "Degraded Imagery" can best be described by giving its general principles. The process starts with a photograph and continues thru four primary steps. The steps are not firm, once familiar with the process feel free to develop your own procedures, expand and interchange the steps, discover new materials and encourage your students to do the same. The primary steps are (1) elimination of excess detail, (2) control of resolution, (3) addition of texture, and (4) addition of color.

The elimination of excess detail is the process of removing all detail unnecessary to the thought you want communicated. This step is vital because excess details tend to hide desired details in latter steps. The techniques used in this step include the following: cutting out, scratching out, tearing out, painting over, masking, cropping, and other techniques. One of the easiest techniques for the elimination of excess detail is using steel wool as a photographic eraser. It will take some experimentation to find a steel wool and a photographic

paper that work well together.

Step two the control of resolution is where you distort the simplified image obtained in step one and evolve it into the form you desire. This step requires much trial and error. This is the step where the image departs from being a simple graphic representation of reality and becomes an image of your own. The trial and error necessary lessens with experience. The procedures in this step include a variety of copying and filtering techniques and may take you thru multiple generations. The copying techniques I have employed in this step have included : photo copy, thermofax transparencies, thermal ditto masters, copy film, paper negatives, etc.. For filtration I have used everything I could find. I applied these materials to filters at varying distances from the enlarger. I have also attached these filtering materials to the front of the camera, and directly to the image obtained in step one. When attaching a filter to the surface of an image it serves a dual role as a filter and a texture.

In step three the addition of texture, you give the image produced in step two the look of a specific medium or technique. In this step I have scratched, tore, folded, and crushed the image. I have covered the surface of the image with a clear drying glue and textured it to resemble brush strokes, wood and a variety of other surfaces. I have tried every substance imaginable on the surface of the image and am continuing to discover new techniques. Be careful to take into consideration the length of time materials hold up for.

Step four is the addition of color, this step may be accomplished concurrently with steps two and three. You can use in this step artist's colors or any substance with color.

A partial list of the materials used in the steps include: salt, glue, make-up, water color, chalk, shellac, bath crystals, furniture polish, hair spray, denture cream, toilet paper, talcum powder, ditto masters, steel wool, and thermofax transparencies. This list can be extended indefinitely.

When teaching these techniques at a camp for handicapped people I utilized simple pin hole cameras. The campers would bend a piece of photographic paper any way they wanted and I would place it in the pin hole camera. They would select a scene place the camera down and open the latch. As the exposure was going on I would have the campers search the scene for things with color. When the campers were away I would print their pictures and grind their colors. The next day I would have the campers sprinkle the colors they collected over the portions of the picture they represented. They could brush off and rearrange the colors as often as they wanted. When they were satisfied I would spray the image with shellac and let it dry. The image would be dry in two to three days.

"Degraded Imagery" need not utilize darkroom equipment, it can use polaroid or magazine images. The process can be very simple and still produce fine imagery. The simpler processes put more limits on your creativity. The complex procedures give unlimited freedom of expression. "Degraded Imagery" can make it easy to imitate other artists styles. But this is a trap, when I first approached galleries

with my work, I showed the techniques ability to imitate different artistic styles. I couldn't get a show and my techniques were often compared to paint by numbers. I reworked my techniques, developed a unique style, and finally got an exhibition. With this process quality becomes simple so originality and thought becomes more important.

To get started working with "Degraded Imagery", scour your neighborhood for materials with interesting colors and textures for your art work. Then cut out strips of card board and number each one. On each strip try a different one of the materials you collected keeping careful records of which strip is which. When this is done you can try the materials in combination, and you can try physical manipulation of the texture strips by such methods as scratching or crushing the surface. These numbered strips will become your vocabulary of textures and colors for future works.

You can not experiment in this way with resolution control because each image is different and will respond uniquely to the copying and filtering techniques.

Reviewing the process, first select an image and remove all detail unnecessary to what you want communicated. Take the simplified image and experiment with it until you get the look and the feeling you desire. Then review your vocabulary of colors and textures, applying them to the image as you see fit.

It may be difficult for you to imagine all the effects possible

with these techniques. To aid you I have produced three portfolios that show a wide variety of effects. These portfolios are available for exhibition at no charge. For information on obtaining an exhibition write, "Degraded Imagery", 5739 N. Fairhill Street, Phila., PA. 19120.